



Transcript for “Autobiography and Memoir”

An Audio Program from *This Goodly Land: Alabama’s Literary Landscape*

Interviewer Maiben Beard and Dr. Bert Hitchcock, Professor emeritus, of Auburn University discuss autobiography and memoir. This transcript has been edited for readability.

Ms. Beard: Welcome to *This Goodly Land*’s audio program about autobiography and memoir. I’m Maiben Beard.

We are talking today with Dr. Bert Hitchcock, Professor Emeritus of the Auburn University Department of English.

It’s good to have you with us today, Dr. Hitchcock.

Dr. Hitchcock: Being here is my pleasure, Maiben.

Ms. Beard: Let’s start by talking about what we mean when we use the terms “autobiography” and “memoir.” Many people use these words interchangeably. Is there a meaningful distinction between them?

Dr. Hitchcock: My answer to that question is “maybe ... at times ... sometimes.” Words are wonderful things. They can help us understand, simplify, but they can also complicate immensely, and we’ve got a real thicket of problems with meanings with these two words. Part of that problem is that the meaning has shifted over time. People have used the same word for different meanings, and in some ways autobiography and memoir have completely swapped meanings over time.

It may be worth noting that “autobiography” is a relatively new word in English. It began to be used in the language in the late Eighteenth Century and really didn’t come into very full usage until the Nineteenth Century, and that’s relatively recent in terms of overall history. The term comes from putting together three Greek roots: “auto-” meaning self, “bio-” meaning life, and “-graphy” meaning showing or writing. So it’s very obvious—self-writing one’s life is the meaning. But Englishmen were a little reluctant to use that term at first. They were using the term “self-biography,” for example, for a while, but it was felt that this was a combination of Saxon roots and Greek roots. They didn’t think

that was good, but they also thought that “autobiography,” the Greek-derived term, was a little too pretentious and pedantic. So it took a little while for the term to get into use, but obviously it’s in common use now.

“Memoir” is an older word. It was being used in English before “autobiography,” but “memoir” in its original meanings did not refer specifically to what we use the term for today. In fact, it was a general term for notes, and really, in diplomatic government use, it was used to refer to a formal memorandum. So there have been changes in the use of the term over the years.

Let me test a little bit and see if my schoolboy understanding of these terms corresponds with those of listeners. I think, and a good many people generally have thought, of autobiography as written by a public person about his or her own life, explaining events in that life, putting forward motivations and so forth for that life. Pretty formal, pretty distant, generally chronological, “I was born ...,” proceeding on, obviously not to after death, but proceeding on to a later part of life, and covering a long period of time. In contrast, memoir I think, initially people thought of as covering probably a shorter period of time, being a little less formal, maybe more personal, more emotional.

Those two definitions have started to fade a little bit now, as I say, almost a swap-out. It’s complicated by the singular and plural of memoirs. “Memoir” without the “s” and “memoirs” with the “s” mean two different things or have meant two different things. “Memoirs,” at one time, was pretty synonymous with autobiography. A person, a public person probably, was writing about public events that a lot of people knew and clarifying from one perspective those events. One of the distinctions that has existed, I think, in the understanding of autobiography and memoir has been that, initially, autobiography was pretty personal, it focused on the individual writing his or her life, and memoir, as it was understood earlier, tended less to focus on that individual than on the culture and other people that had had intercourse with that individual. That has almost completely changed now so that memoir has come to refer to something very personal and much more introspective than it used to be.

So, as I say, there are problems with the terms. Sometimes I think maybe we’ve tried to make too many distinctions regarding these kinds of writing. Talking about types of writing or genre is really more an instrument of reading rather than a formula for writing. So we come up with these classifications which we find generally helpful, but then, it seems to me, writers feel forced to get into these categories or we feel forced to put new works into these categories, and that just makes for a lot of problems.

We find some different terms being used today, “life-writing” or “life-narrative”. What we used to call “nonfiction prose,” we have another term we use now, “creative nonfiction.” These are both broad categories in which life-writing, autobiography, or memoir fit. That’s a long answer to your question. As I say, whichever metaphor you want to use—thicket, shifting sands—for the terms autobiography and memoir: memoir certainly is autobiographical, but today I think memoir means something very personal, with a shorter coverage of the time, more emotional.

Ms. Beard: Please tell us something about the historical evolution of this literary form.

Dr. Hitchcock: Scholars have been able to trace writing about one's self way, way back. Classical Greece and Rome and before that, but, by and large, we think of the modern tradition of autobiography as dating from late Eighteenth Century or early Nineteenth Century. Some scholars tie it in with the rise of Romanticism, with political revolution, a time when the worth of the individual human being was given some primacy. We saw more value in the individual human being than perhaps we had at earlier times.

Also, scholars have characterized the evolution a little bit in terms of shifting from "bios," an emphasis on the life, to "auto," the self. We are less interested, it seems, in the facts of the life and more in understanding about the self. Another way to talk about that is seeing the authority shift from "facts" to "voice," from relative objectivity to the way that person is presenting himself. Still another way to put it is from having a concern for accuracy to a concern for authenticity.

We might think about some titles of famous autobiographies. Again, let me test a little bit of what I think probably people think of, with what people actually think of, in terms of the development of the form. I said that we looked to the late Eighteenth Century or early Nineteenth Century as the start of the modern tradition of autobiography, but we can go back further. One of the most famous, really standing at the head of this tradition, is St. Augustine's *Confessions*, which dates from late Fourth Century.

By the way (back to those terms again), "confessions" was a term that was used for autobiography. That word indicates pretty clearly what started as and remained a major thrust for autobiographical writing, that of a person looking at himself (usually himself), seeing the sins and the misdeeds and in some ways becoming reformed or resurrected and using himself as an example for others.

So St. Augustine's *Confessions* dating from the late Fourth Century and that same term (at least in English translation) with Rousseau's Eighteenth Century *Confessions* are names that come up. Another, a Sixteenth Century Italian whose autobiographical work is well known and often regarded as a classic, is Benvenuto Cellini. We often put the title *Autobiography* on that now. In the Italian, *Vita* (life), it was "Life" and "life" was another term used for these works. "The life of ..." and "confessions" were earlier terms used along with memoir and then finally autobiography.

A number of works from Americans in American literature might come to mind to persons who think of autobiography: Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, which was written in the late Eighteenth Century. We now call it *The Autobiography*, he didn't call it *The Autobiography*, but that's the term we put on it now. But Jonathan Edward's *Personal Narrative* and Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* are often paired as important early American works, one concerned with otherworldly matters, religious, spiritual matters, and Franklin's, of course, very much a worldly secular work. Some people may also think of another work, though this did not come out as a separate publication the

same way that others did. Thomas Jefferson wrote an autobiography, the *Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson*. So here are those public, well-known figures, as we talked about earlier.

Two of the best known African-American autobiographies, slave narratives, come out of the American Nineteenth Century. Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (a significant title), which was first published in 1845, and Harriet Ann Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which was published in 1861, are probably the two best known of the American slave narratives. Again, neither uses autobiography in the title at this point.

From the early part of the Twentieth Century, there are some titles that people would probably think of: Henry Adams' *The Education of Henry Adams* and two with Alabama relations, Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, which was published in 1901, and Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life*, which was her first autobiography. She published other works, but that was published in 1902. Two works from the Twentieth Century that do have autobiography in the title, people may think of: one is James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, which was published in 1912, and then later in the century, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which was published in 1964.

Again, this is a long answer to your question.

Ms. Beard: Are there special types of these works that are distinctively American?

Dr. Hitchcock: The history and culture of America have certainly given rise to autobiographical writing, and some scholars have made a number of connections that push us pretty close to talking about distinctively American autobiographies. What has become the United States of America of course at one time was the New World, and it represented all sorts of possible deviations and changes from the historical European world with all of its social constraints. So, earlier and later, that got incorporated into political philosophy.

This part of the world was associated with freedom and opportunity. You could do what your talents would allow you to do and through your own efforts and not be hindered or imprisoned by forces outside. So I think that has been an important part of it. Again, an individual was able to achieve perhaps more than he could in the Old World, and he or she could write about it, and others wanted to hear about the "rags to riches" story ("this is what I did from poor beginnings"), the immigrant biographies, for example.

More broadly, two things associated with America at the beginning have contributed to this sense of the self-worth of an individual: the religious part, the Puritanism, a result of the Reformation that said that the individual could interpret the Scriptures for himself (the individual was given a heightened position there) and then of course democracy, the United States became a major democratic experiment. So the importance of the individual in American history and culture lends itself to people feeling that importance and writing about it and to people wanting to read about it.

Some other forms that are tied in with the history of this country (autobiographical forms) are the captivity narratives. People were curious about the Native Americans here, and captivity narratives, the autobiographical accounts of being captured by Indians, were eagerly read. And then, as I already mentioned, there were the slave narratives, the stories of persons being held in slavery. I won't go as far as a few people have in claiming that autobiography is a special American form and has had special appeal, but there are a lot of titles, some classic, some very close to classic, that are in that mode.

I keep going back to autobiography versus memoir. Two very well-known works, one of them extremely well-known, are autobiographical works, but we usually don't think of them as autobiography. One of course is Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, which clearly is an autobiography, published in 1854, but it does not deal with the whole life, it deals with, in fact, two years, two days, and two months ostensibly, so a short period of time. Another one, although he wrote other works that we give the label autobiography to, is Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*. We don't think of this as autobiography (it is not an autobiography), and again, partly because of this limitation of time and space, we might be more likely to think of it as a memoir, for example.

Ms. Beard: Can we learn anything about society and culture from reading these books or are they too individual and personal?

Dr. Hitchcock: I can answer this more absolutely, yes! We certainly will learn about society and culture from reading autobiographies. We humans are products of our culture. We have passed along to us from earlier generations an idea of what reality is, how to view the world, and this is bound to be reflected in anything anybody writes. Some persons, of course, react to what their culture says they are and the way they should view things. That still gives us a very clear picture of what that is, whether they are operating on it consciously or not or are indeed consciously reacting to it. So yes, we can learn a great deal about society and culture from reading autobiographies.

Ms. Beard: Why do you think readers are so interested in this type of work?

Dr. Hitchcock: I don't think that there's any question that they are, you're right. There are a lot of reasons probably. One may be that this is a way of learning more about ourselves. We are interested in ourselves. I think we are curious about other people. One of the aspects of autobiography is that it is usually a narrative. And I think that we like narrative, we like story, we like knowing what happens and what happens next and so forth. There is also curiosity about other people. It's probably hard to read an autobiography without reflecting on our own lives, and we probably welcome the opportunity to do this at a little removed stage.

One other thing that I think is appealing, and this is the opposite side of the coin to talking about liking narrative and liking story often in fiction, but it is the appeal of trueness here: this really happened, this actually happened, I'm not lost in a completely imaginary world, hey that can be entertaining and fun, but this really happened. So I think

there is a very great interest in autobiography. Some just have curiosity, some are wanting to know the juicy facts, thinking they will get the juicy facts. But all of these factors I think are involved in people wanting to read autobiography.

Ms. Beard: Have there been fads or trends in writing and publishing these works?

Dr. Hitchcock: Yes, and we've got a very good example right now. Some people have gone so far as to call the memoir, as it exists today, the signature form of American literature at this time. There has been really almost an explosion in the last twenty years, thirty years, of memoir. The titles carrying that term or autobiography have tripled from publishers. Again, we're shifting meanings here some, but there is a great fad right now, it seems to me, for memoir.

Some of this can be explained, I think, by the fact that the writers are from the Me generation: "I am interested in myself, I like myself, or I don't like myself but let me explain that to you." Some explanation has been involved with the obsession with therapy today, with confession: "I need to tell you this, I will reveal all" (back to the confessions again, we're picking up on earlier forms), but we're seeing accounts of abuse, trauma, memoirs dealing with trauma, much more than there used to be. Again a distinction between autobiography and memoir that some have made is that autobiography tends to present resolved problems ("let me tell you how I resolved a problem to become a great man"), whereas memoir often leaves the problems unresolved and pulls the reader much more into dealing with these things.

There is again a tremendous fad, I think, in writing memoirs now. There is some negative reaction coming to that. Some have called it a gratuitous celebration of self that doesn't have anything to do with community or with anything but the individual. They claim that people are concerned only with "kiss and tell" and they just tell you everything. But the books are selling, so we'll just see whether it continues or not.

Ms. Beard: What motivates someone to write his or her autobiography or memoir?

Dr. Hitchcock: There are lots of reasons, and I guess the best person to ask is one who is an autobiographer, which I am not. One of the ways of defining humanity has been to talk about the reflexive self-consciousness. We are capable of seeing ourselves as another self in some ways. Some say this is why that tradition started with St. Augustine, who gave us an example of a subject really seeing himself as another self. But some of the same reasons that are involved in people liking to read autobiographies are involved in the motivation for someone to write an autobiography.

What we often hear from people is that they want to, if not recover, then to have some understanding about their past, to document their own past, and to document history and culture (for example, growing up in a small American town, which not as many people are doing anymore), the idea of confession, "I have led a not so good life" or "I have led an exemplary life, let me tell you about it so that I won't be lost in obscurity or that you will be a better person." It seems to me that the ego is involved here pretty importantly in

some ways.

Sometimes I think there's a genuine attempt to try to understand one's self; a search for identity, who am I, and a claim can be made that we really form our self-identity through narrative, that's how we come to know who we are. And we can never of course overlook the motivation of making money: "I have some juicy things to tell on other people, and this will be a chance for me to make some money." So once again, there are a lot of different reasons.

Ms. Beard: There have been controversial situations recently where writers have been accused of everything from exaggeration to outright fabrication in writing their life stories. How important is it for a writer to stick to the facts?

Dr. Hitchcock: We don't think today of facts as absolutely as we used to, and (again the distinction between memoir and autobiography), for some, autobiography is regarded as *the* record of some things that happened, while memoir is regarded as *a* record. There can be different perspectives, and the facts may differ depending on the perspective. I think it is important, I think readers consider it important, for a writer who advertises himself or herself as writing an autobiography to try to stick to the facts. Someone has talked about what they called an "autobiographical pact." I'll talk about it as a contract. I think we probably as a reader do enter into an unwritten contract with a writer.

If that work is advertised as an autobiography, we expect that person to at least make a sincere attempt to deal with things as accurately as he or she can, even if we recognize that facts are not absolute. When did the Civil War end, for example? O.K., I can give you several dates there. It depends on what you mean by that, so things are complicated. But I think we do expect a person at least to make a sincere attempt to deal with the events and circumstances of his life and obviously, as you say, I think we get a little upset when that doesn't happen. Even if we realize that there's always going to be some creativity in constructing a self, making a self, or in recounting things that happened in the past, I think we expect that person (the term you used was "outright fabrication"), we don't expect that person to do outright fabrication. If that's what the person wants to do, call it fiction.

Ms. Beard: Where do ghostwriters fit into all this?

Dr. Hitchcock: Well, in America, at least in the United States, the tradition of the slave narrative certainly plays a part here. Again, historically we've seen a change in who writes autobiography from the more standard autobiography of the well-known person, already well-known before the autobiography is written. In some ways we shifted over to the person at the other end of the social scale, a person in prison for misdeeds, for example, and then back to the middle for the ordinary person. But some of these individuals were more able because of education and natural talents to write their own autobiography than others were and, as we moved away from the more public, well-known figures, we increasingly had individuals who needed some help in putting their stories forward for whatever reasons they had for putting those stories forward.

American slaves, of course, were by law forced to be illiterate. They could not be taught to read or write. So in getting their stories told, particularly promoted by the abolition societies, they needed an, a term that's often used is, "amanuensis": "let me tell you my story, I can certainly tell it orally, but you need to write it down, and you want to shape it a little bit into that narrative to make it dramatic and more effective." So a number of the slave narratives were actually written by someone else. Now the two I mentioned, the two most famous, and it's in the title of Douglass's, were written by themselves. Frederick Douglass and Mary Ann Jacobs both wrote their own, and this is one of the reasons that they occupy the position they do.

This has continued, of course. We have a lot of ghostwriters sometimes. Back to advertising again, the title would indicate "as told to" or "with." Sometimes it's not there but a person has help. Malcolm X's autobiography has some ghostwriting in it, and there are some other famous ones that people got some help on. So I think this is likely to continue. I, for one, would like that noted on the title page, nothing wrong with "as told to" or "with," but knowing that the words have been shaped. Of course all writing is shaped by editors some anyway, but I would like to know that as part of the contract myself.

Ms. Beard: From time to time, we see the publication of some historical or literary figure's diary or journal. What does it take to transform a diary or journal into an autobiography or memoir?

Dr. Hitchcock: One important concern with autobiography that comes into play here, I think, is intention: what does the writer intend, why is he or she writing the autobiography. We are talking here about the difference between private documents and public documents. Diaries, journals, and letters are not intended for the general public. They are written for a much smaller, much more personal, audience. There's no shaping, most of them are not narrative, and, as I've said, autobiography or memoir has a large narrative element. Both of those have large narrative elements in them. So here's the difference: one who decides to write an autobiography, for whatever reason, may certainly make use of a diary or journal and go back to his or her own letters, but then it becomes an autobiography and requires narrative coherence. Shaping and the idea of a self (it has to be sustained throughout many, many pages) make a big difference here.

Ms. Beard: If any of our listeners are interested in writing their own life stories, what are the most important things for them to keep in mind?

Dr. Hitchcock: Probably, as I have already mentioned, that what we often think of as pure absolute fact is not so pure or so absolute. I think there are likely to be a good many surprises, unexpected discoveries, for one who sits down seriously to write an autobiography. All writing, it's been said, is to a degree both autobiographical and fictional, no matter what we write. To a degree it is autobiographical, it's relying on our own experience, but even that which we call autobiography has imaginative elements, it has to. I think perhaps some people who start out think that it's not going to be this way,

that they're going to be able to accurately recall everything, that there's going to be only one take on it.

If they loosen themselves up on this, I think they're likely to be in for some surprises, some discoveries that perhaps they have not expected. They may welcome these or they may not. There are surprises, there are pleasures, there are certain necessities, but there is also sometimes some delusion that goes on with autobiography. Getting into this situation, people are going to discover this and discover a lot about themselves. They may go into it thinking "I will tell everything," and they will get into it and start to have some reservations ("perhaps I shouldn't do this"), so I think they need to be prepared for that.

One general statement about autobiography that I have grown to be very fond of, I think might be useful for persons thinking about writing their own autobiographies to hear. Just let me give you a few sentences from James M. Cox, a professor at Dartmouth who has written about autobiography. Here's what Cox says:

Autobiography is at once an act and a convention lying between the literature of imagination and the literature of fact. It's a way to get into the culture for those readers outside of it, and it is a way out of one's culture for those inside it who are writing. It is an attempt both to make and record a life. Some writers make more than they record since the making may be all the record they have. Others record more than they make. No autobiographer can avoid doing both.

So you are going to record and you are going to make, no matter what. I think people may be unaware of this ("I'm simply going to record the facts here"), but you are creating, inevitably.

Ms. Beard: Thank you for talking with us, Dr. Hitchcock.

Dr. Hitchcock: Thank you, Maiben.

Ms. Beard: We've been talking about autobiography and memoir with Dr. Bert Hitchcock, Professor Emeritus of the Auburn University Department of English.

This audio program is produced for *This Goodly Land: Alabama's Literary Landscape*, a Web site connecting Alabama and its writers. You can find additional resources on this topic when you visit us at www.alabamaliterarymap.org.

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